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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BUENOS AIRES 000984

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/28/2029

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [SNAR](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [CO](#) [AR](#)

SUBJECT: DAS MCMULLEN BRIEFS ARGENTINE OFFICIALS ON
COLOMBIA-U.S. DCA

REF: (A) SECSTATE 89408 (B) BUENOS AIRES 0939 (C)
BUENOS AIRES 0911 (D) STATE 88773

Classified By: CDA Thomas P. Kelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: WHA DAS Christopher McMullen visited Buenos Aires August 26-27 to brief Argentine authorities on the USG's Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Colombia ahead of the August 28 UNASUR conference hosted by Argentina in Bariloche. He had excellent meetings with Cabinet Chief Minister (Prime Minister-equivalent) Anibal Fernandez, Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana, and Vice Minister of Defense Alfredo Forti. Fernandez thanked McMullen for his clear explanation of the DCA's scope, and promised to relay the message to President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. (Press reported that he did so.) Taiana expressed concern that the DCA was open to misinterpretation in the already tense Andean sub-region and that the GOA hopes UNASUR will adopt a consensus to make South America a "zone of peace." Forti acknowledged that the DCA represented more of a regularization of U.S. status in Colombia than a new regime. McMullen expressed hope for an "equitable debate" on the DCA at summit. He cautioned against member countries ganging up on Colombia, saying it would be a mistake with negative implications for UNASUR. Still, Taiana and Forti's comments and questions seemed to suggest that the GoA will not be helpful in Bariloche. All press featured DAS McMullen's meetings with Taiana and Fernandez prominently. "La Nacion" ran its exclusive interview with McMullen on the same day as the Bariloche UNASUR Summit, and his meeting with six key Argentine opinion leaders whose columns will help present our perspective to the Argentine public over the next few weeks. Secretary Clinton's message to FM Taiana on the DCA (ref A) came in after McMullen's meeting with Taiana, and was delivered to the GOA later in the afternoon. End Summary.

12. (C) DAS McMullen visited Argentina August 26-27 to address GOA concerns regarding the USG's Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Colombia on the use of its military bases ahead of the August 28 UNASUR conference hosted by Argentina in Bariloche. McMullen, accompanied by the CDA and ADCM, met at the MFA with Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana and VFM Victorio Taccetti, at Casa Rosada with Cabinet Chief Anibal Fernandez, and at the Ministry of Defense with MOD Secretary for International Relations, Alfredo Forti.

13. (C) DAS McMullen told GOA officials that he appreciated the opportunity to brief GOA officials, as host of the UNASUR conference, on the DCA and its context. He explained that the U.S. and Colombian governments were not able to share the agreement's details until negotiations finished August 14. He pointed out that the USG has enjoyed access to Colombia military bases for many years and that the DCA merely formalizes and updates bilateral arrangements with Colombia

to combat drugs and the FARC. According to the agreement, the USG will have enhanced access to several Colombian bases, he said, but they will remain under Colombian control and Colombia must approve each U.S. access request. The agreement stipulates that both parties must abide by the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries as well as respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other countries in the region. He stressed that the USG's ultimate goal is to decrease its military presence in Colombia, but that it needs to do so in a manner that preserves the gains won in recent years against the FARC and the illicit drug trade. McMullen noted that the U.S. Congress had earlier capped the number of U.S. troops stationed in Colombia at any given time at 800, and over the past few years the average number of troops on the ground has been about 250.

Foreign Minister Questions U.S. Regional Intentions

14. (C) Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana disclosed that President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's (CFK) first call in arranging the UNASUR summit was to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, and that they had agreed to keep the agenda open beyond the DCA issue. The GOA hopes that UNASUR will establish a consensus to make South America a "zone of peace." He said that Ecuador's role at the conference as UNASUR's President Pro-Tempore was complicated by the fact that it had broken relations with Colombia.

15. (C) Taiana claimed regional reaction to the DCA flowed from its desire to remain free of nuclear, chemical and other

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weapons of mass destruction. He credited Argentina for rolling back decades of tense relations with Chile and Brazil. Taiana claimed the U.S. during WWII had built a base in Rio Grande do Sul near Brazil's border with Argentina, insinuating that the location had no reasonable strategic justification other than to antagonize Argentina. He explained that the GOA's concern with the DCA is rooted in its strong sensitivity to foreign military presence in the region, largely deriving from the UK's continued presence on the disputed Malvinas/Falkland Islands. Taiana explained that although U.S.-Colombian cooperation is longstanding and evident, the GOA is worried that this cooperation will extend beyond Colombian borders, claiming that Colombia's conflict has spilled over into Ecuador and Venezuela. While Colombia argues that it has the sovereign right to have a military accord with the USG, neighboring countries, such as Venezuela and Ecuador, believe the accord poses a threat against their security. Taiana also questioned Colombia's justification for the DCA at a time when President Uribe was claiming the FARC was largely defeated.

16. (C) Taiana expressed concern that the DCA was open to misinterpretation in the already tense Andean sub-region. He complained that the USG had not done an adequate job in explaining other regional military initiatives, citing as examples the 2008 announcement of the U.S. Fourth Fleet. Taiana asserted that a USAF document summarizing the outcome of an academic seminar in May had affirmed that Palanquero could be of strategic importance in landing an invasion of sub-Saharan Africa. He also claimed that the recent unannounced passage of the Amphibious Assault Ship Makin Island LHD8 through Argentine territorial waters and the Magellan straits (ref B) had alarmed the Argentine military and raised questions about whether U.S. military use of the DCA would be similarly "disrespectful" of neighboring countries' airspace. Drawing from guidance (ref D), CDA Kelly explained why the USG did not believe the Makin Island had been required to notify the GOA of its passage off the coast of Argentina or through the Straits of Magellan. He said the Embassy had prepared a diplomatic note to that effect. (Note: Secretary Clinton's message to FM Taiana on the DCA came in after McMullen's MFA meeting, and was

delivered later in the afternoon.)

Cabinet Chief Raises Immunity, Chain of Command

17. (C) In McMullen's meeting with Cabinet Chief Minister (Prime Minister-equivalent) Anibal Fernandez, the Minister asked if the agreement would increase the number of U.S. military in Colombia. McMullen pointed out that the U.S. Congress had set an upper limit of 800 soldiers in Colombia at any given time, but on average there had only been there 250 U.S. military in Colombia. This ceiling applies to the DCA as well. In response to Fernandez's question regarding immunity, McMullen said the DCA provided for limited privileges and immunities for U.S. forces in Colombia. Fernandez also asked about the chain of command. DAS McMullen said Colombian bases would remain under Colombian command, and that U.S. forces must request Colombian authorization for base access. Fernandez thanked McMullen for his visit and committed to brief President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on McMullen's presentation. (Note: The press reported that Fernandez immediately after his meeting with McMullen briefed CFK on it.) He indicated that McMullen's explanation of the DCA, in addition to Colombian President Uribe's explanation to President CFK, was very clear and useful in preparing for the UNASUR summit the following day. McMullen expressed hope for an "equitable debate" on the DCA at summit. He cautioned against member countries ganging up on Colombia, saying it would be a mistake with negative implications for UNASUR.

18. (C) In closing, Fernandez noted the "productive and constructive" relationship he had with former Ambassador Wayne "even during difficult times" and insisted that Argentina is not an "anti-gringo country." He expressed hope that bilateral law enforcement cooperation between the U.S. Embassy and Argentine security forces would deepen under Ambassador Vilma Martinez's tenure. He reiterated Argentina's commitment to work with the USG to fight drugs and terrorism. DAS McMullen thanked Fernandez for receiving him and wished Argentina success in hosting the UNASUR summit as the grouping is important to advancing hemispheric security interests.

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Vice MOD Focuses on Immunities and Mission

19. (C) Argentine Vice Minister of Defense Alfredo Forti, joined by senior advisors Leo Heikimian and Alejandro Salesi, voiced appreciation for McMullen's presentation and engaged in a cordial dialogue over its details. He noted that Defense Minister Nilda Garre, who was looking forward to her upcoming September 7-11 U.S. visit and call on Defense Secretary Gates, was already in Bariloche so could not receive the briefing. Forti asked about the role of the civilian contractors covered in the DCA, probing for details about their functions and immunities. McMullen explained that the majority performed logistics and management jobs related to our counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism cooperation in Colombia. He explained that a great many worked for non-Department of Defense agencies and that their immunities depended in part on their job and how the Government of Colombia had designated them. McMullen emphasized that U.S. military and civilian personnel enjoyed broader immunities in many other countries, including European nations.

110. (C) Forti was interested in the relationship of the DCA to previous U.S.-Colombian security cooperation accords, as well as the role of the U.S. Congress in either authorizing the agreement or monitoring the activities. DAS MacMullen underscored that established Congressional limitations on the U.S. presence under Plan Colombia remained in place. While the new agreement had been briefed to several relevant

Congressional Committees, it was not viewed as a "treaty" requiring Senate ratification.

¶11. (C) Forti received well the assurance that Colombian commanders remained in charge of the bases, with ultimate authority over the activities of U.S. personnel. Although the Colombian command did not have directive authority to establish missions, they held a final say over any activities initiated by the U.S. command chain at the base, McMullen stated.

¶12. (C) After hearing DAS McMullen's assurances that the DCA was focused on internal Colombian security threats, the Vice Minister probed about the surveillance role of U.S. assets. He inquired specifically whether they could replace the role of Manta in Ecuador. McMullen emphasized that the two bases that were the primary focus of the agreement, Palanquero and Apiay, were poorly situated to sustain flight monitoring the waters of the Pacific littoral. More specifically, McMullen said, any surveillance missions were restricted to Colombian territory. Overflight of neighboring countries, he said, would require both Colombian assent and formal approval by the neighboring state. Regarding the closure of Manta, McMullen mentioned that some initial discussions had been held with Ecuador to permit surveillance flights by U.S. civilian (Department of Homeland Security) planes out of Guayaquil or another Pacific airport on a "gas-and-go" (fees for services) basis.

¶13. (C) Turning to the broader question of the regional reaction to the U.S.-Colombia DCA, Forti asked what Colombia and the United States might do to give assurances to the region and forestall an incipient arms race. McMullen's answer was threefold. First, he questioned the presumption of an arms race at all, noting that recent big-ticket purchases by Chile and Brazil were akin to cyclical military upgrades and responded to a long lead time. Second, he said, the best measure to increase security in South America and decrease the need for new armaments was to defeat the FARC, the region's most violent and potent threat to security. Third, McMullen said, the United States was willing to hear proposals for sustaining transparent and regular communication about security cooperation through appropriate mechanism, possibly UNASUR's Defense Council. Any transparency regime, he emphasized, would have to apply to all countries in the region, however, including Venezuela.

¶14. (C) Forti, seemingly satisfied with DAS McMullen's explanations, acknowledged the U.S. position that the U.S.-Colombia DCA represented more of a regularization of U.S. status in Colombia than a new regime. He accepted McMullen's explanation that we had similar base access agreements with some 60 countries in the world, and immunity regimes for U.S. military personnel in approximately 120. He inquired whether we had another such agreement in South America. McMullen responded no, saying we had comparable

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agreements in El Salvador and Curacao, but not in South America. Pointedly asked whether we had such access in Honduras, McMullen said we did not, that our access to bases there was on a non-permanent basis, based largely on understandings that date from the 1950s. Forti closed by encouraging future close dialogue on such issues to avoid misunderstandings and suspicions in the region.

Visit Gets Extensive Press Play as Summit Opens

¶15. (SBU) All press featured DAS McMullen's meetings with Taiana and Fernandez prominently but in no case did the news make the front pages. Most of the stories were sourced from the Embassy press statement and Argentine FM sources who reportedly said that the GOA asked the USG to put more pressure on Honduras to respect democracy (only one headline, in the leading daily "Clarín," however, focused on this

point). Other headlines ranged from "U.S. States Its Case to Cabinet Chief on Colombian Bases" to "Obama Envoy Clarifies Reach of Colombian Deal" and "Obama Envoy Tries to Explain to GOA the Reach of Military Agreement." McMullen also gave an Embassy-arranged exclusive interview to the daily-of-record "La Nacion" in which he said that Washington wants to scale down the number of soldiers posted in Latin America and instead seek to increase cooperation with governments of the region. He also met with several influential foreign policy columnists who will likely present our perspective on the DCA in their columns over the next few weeks.

Comment

¶16. (C) McMullen's visit was well-received by the GOA and helped get our message across to the Argentine public in time for the UNASUR summit. Still, Taiana and Forti's comments and questions seemed to reflect a persistent skepticism of our intentions in the region. At the very least, however, the GOA cannot claim that we were not transparent with them about the DCA, and the visit reduces the likelihood that the GOA will misrepresent the nature of the DCA at the UNASUR summit.

KELLY